

Westminster MPs: performing politics

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Intentions

My aim is to explore the work of Westminster Members of Parliament (MPs) in parliament and constituencies and convey both the diversity and dynamism of their political performances.¹ Rather than contrasting MPs with an idealised version of what they might be, I interpret MPs' work as I see it. If I have any moral and political intent, it is to argue that disenchantment with politics is misdirected – we should target our critiques at politicians in government rather than in their parliamentary role – and to call for fuller citizens' engagement with political processes.

Some explanation of my fieldwork in the UK's House of Commons will help readers understand how and why I arrived at this interpretation. In 2011 then Clerk of the House, Sir Malcolm Jack, who I knew from doing research in the House of Lords (1998-2002), ascertained that the Speaker was 'content for the research to proceed', and his successor, Sir Robert Rogers, issued me with a pass and assigned a sponsor. I roamed all over the Palace, outbuildings and constituencies during 2012 (and to a lesser extent in 2013) listening, watching and conversing wherever I went. This entailed (a) observing interaction in debating chambers, committee rooms and in offices (including the Table Office) in Westminster and constituencies, (b) over 100 pre-arranged unstructured interviews with MPs, former MPs, officials, journalists, MPs' staff and peers, (c) following four threads: media/twitter exchanges, the Eastleigh by-election with the three main parties, scrutiny of the family justice part of the Children and Families Bill, and constituency surgeries, (d) advising parliamentary officials on seeking MPs' feedback on House services. At first I was frequently lost and wondering whether I should be somewhere else, such was the multitude of different events going on simultaneously. After six months I couldn't walk through the

¹ This research would not have been possible without a Leverhulme Research Fellowship and the support of colleagues at SOAS, the Clerk of the House, Sir Robert Rogers, his predecessor Sir Malcolm Jack, the Speaker, and my sponsors in parliament, Matthew Hamlyn and Tom Goldsmith. It was greatly enriched by the kindness and advice of many MPs and MPs' staff, who I will not name to protect their identity, officials (in addition to those above) David Natzler, Andrew Kennon, Oonagh Gay, Philippa Helme, John Bengner, Liam Lawrence-Smyth, Paul Evans and Nick Walker, Hansard Society colleagues Ruth Fox and Matt Korris, and the BBC journalist Mark D'Arcy.

estate without bumping into someone I could gossip with and ask for advice about where political heat was being generated that day.

The main challenges were to establish trust and make good use of time. When doing interviews I began by explaining my agenda: to understand the nature of their work, how it is changing and why it varies for different MPs. Early in the fieldwork I began clumsily but gradually learned how to express at speed that this conversation was constrained by no rigid set of questions, which can be infantilising and boring, and that they could trust my promises of confidentiality and discretion. For old hands, a matter of minutes was enough to make a judgement; some newer ones were less practised at working out who they could trust. Most seemed relieved to talk about what they really do rather than idealised versions to counter often-vicious criticism by the press. When interviewing politicians, the masters and mistresses of representation of themselves as well as others, you have to continually ask yourself (even more than usual), “Why is she saying that?” “Is he trying to impress and if so, who?” “What is she not saying?” After all, as the sociologist Bourdieu points out,

‘...what is essential *goes without saying because it comes without saying*: the tradition is silent, not least about itself as a tradition; customary law is content to enumerate specific applications of principles which remain implicit and unformulated, because unquestioned (Bourdieu 1977: 167 original emphasis).

But also MPs are in the business of promoting causes, political parties and themselves. So my interest was not just to compile what MPs say they do but also to watch, converse and participate in Parliament and constituencies and build up an understanding through both interaction and continual interpretation of their practices.

Like any other interpretative social scientist, I arrive at my account in part through the lens of my own history (including past research), my guesses about how these conclusions may be received by readers, and the influence of various other researchers. The literature I know best – ethnographies about aid – tends to dwell on history and critically analyse the power hierarchies that are taken for granted by aid workers. But embracing Jean Pierre Olivier de Sardan’s work on aid, and work on the anthropology of politics and law by David Kertzer, Marc Abélès, Jonathan Spencer and Bruno Latour, exposes the inadequacy of over-emphasising power as if it is culturally naked. These political anthropologists have inclined me towards writing about culture as much as power, while one of the editors of this volume, Shirin Rai, inspired me to take a hard look at diversity in performance. More recently engagement with a group of scholars focusing on complexity in management – Chris Mowles, Ralph Stacey, Doug Griffin, Nick Sarra and Karen Norman – has helped me to step out of the dead-end of dialectical explanations that relies on linear causality and dualistic explanatory theories (Stacey 2011). I will return to this in relation to the performance of politics at the end of the article.

Performance in hierarchy, time and space – what do MPs do?

Understanding the practice and performance of politics by MPs is complicated by (a) their *diversity*; (b) continual, uneven and unpredictable *change*; and (c) multiple *pressures*. I will explain each in turn to illustrate how academic work on parliamentarians that underplays difference fails to capture the dynamic and contradictory nature of MPs' work.

The diversity among MPs arises out of different backgrounds and identities, past and present political allegiances, their prospects and aspirations. Class, gender, race/ethnicity, disability and sexuality all play a part in a huge variety of combinations. MPs remain unrepresentative of the population at large – with only 22% women to men and 4% Black and Asian MPs (compared to 8 per cent in the UK) – but more diverse than ever before in terms of identity. Many gay/lesbian MPs, and those with disabilities, are no longer hidden or marginalised (although the buildings and geographical organisation of the work remains punishing for anyone using a wheelchair). An increase in 'professional' politicians, meaning those who have not had a job beyond political organisations and politicians, and a decline in both former manual workers and upper class MPs, makes MPs' professional background less diverse than the past (McGuinness 2010: 4-5). So despite fluctuations, and professional homogenisation, other aspects of the identity and background of MPs have become more diverse in important ways, certainly more than was the case fifty years ago.

Why is it that different identities and backgrounds lead to different constraints? To take the example of gender, it has been well-documented by others that women MPs face greater hurdles when trying to establish their reputations (Childs 2004; Shaw 2000). The influence is not predictable or deterministic – some have told me being a woman is an advantage, others that it makes no difference while more women MPs point to various mechanisms of exclusion and denigration. Women in all parties have observed that in a mixed gender group when women are outnumbered, which is the norm in Westminster, in the media and within political parties, then women struggle harder to be heard.² A woman can make a point that is ignored but when repeated by a man gets the response, "that is brilliant!" MPs tend to refer to the ideas voiced by male MPs, especially those in more prominent positions, which reinforces the impression that men are the ones with the best ideas.

Lobby journalists, who are also over-represented by men, are drawn to develop close working relationships with and interview male MPs and tend to refer to the male MPs as the cerebral, clever and promising ones. The media report frequently on women MP's appearance, but male MPs' political achievements or abilities. When members of the

² Seminar contributions and informal conversations on October 2011, February 2012 and July 2012. See also Shaw 2000.

Treasury Select Committee were rated by Guardian journalists for their performance at their inquiry into Barclay's fixing of rates, the men were given between 4/10 and 8/10, while two women were given 4/10 on the grounds that they were insufficiently chastening (Elliot and Treanor 2012: 4-5). However, one of them – former banker Andrea Leadsom (Conservative MP) – was focused, persistent and critical of the whole culture of the bank and hit harder than some other members of the committee who scored higher. The comments in cyberspace, where anonymity is easy, can be misogynous and violent. In January 2014 John Nimmo was jailed for making sexist threats on twitter to Stella Creasy MP. Louise Mensch (Conservative MP until 2012) collected some examples of tweets: "Louise Mensch is attractive but makes me want to hit her with a hammer in the face..." and "Louise Mensch is a dumb politi-whore." A man emailed her a death threat saying she had to choose between her children unless she stopped using twitter.³ This is nothing new. Women MPs have always received vile messages, whether via mail or twitter, as have Black and Asian MPs and peers.⁴ It is only the public nature and scale of abuse that has increased because privacy has shrunk and all communication with MPs has multiplied.

Many point to the punishing life for MPs with no dependants (particularly if they have no other source of income) and especially if their constituency is outside London. Parliamentary sitting hours have been changed to ensure fewer evening sittings in the last thirty years, but it has become more difficult to be an MP as well as care for others. New MPs work an average of almost 70 hours a week (Korris 2011) and all MPs are now expected to run two homes – one in London and one in the constituency, staying in both at least weekly, in contrast to infrequent visits to the constituency until the 1970s (Norton 2012). Within constituencies women MPs appear to excel at the surgery work, listening to the often upsetting problems that constituents bring with particular skill and sympathy, and while many men do as well, it appears that the few MPs who delegate all these meetings to staff are male. Whether this makes women more popular constituency MPs with those visiting surgeries, or takes up their time and emotional energy and so reduces their chances for promotion in Westminster, warrants further investigation.

So far I have dwelt on only one hierarchy (based on gender), but equally interesting observations could be made about race or class or age. Several women MPs told me that it is even harder to be taken seriously if you are a *young* woman; experience makes you automatically wise, it is assumed, and youth is associated with naivety. One of the youngest women MPs told me that, "MPs tend to think you're rubbish if you are young so you are always exceeding expectations, which is nice."⁵ *Older* women MPs tend to feel less

³ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-gloucestershire-18391970>, accessed 7th July 2012.

⁴ Commonwealth Parliamentary Association seminar, House of Commons, 24th October 2012; Crewe 2005.

⁵ Interview held by Emma Crewe in July 2012.

intimidated by Commons machismo but have told me that their chances for promotion are lower than those of younger women because the leaders are getting younger and they have a tendency to surround themselves with people like them. So assumptions and opportunities based on gender intersect with other hierarchies, including those based on age.

As influential as background and identity to an MP's particular style of performance, and an area of study that has received huge attention from academics, is their membership of political parties and the hierarchies created within them. Whether or not you are a frontbencher with an official position as government minister or whip, or equivalent in an opposition party, depends on how new you are to Parliament and how many supporters you have in the party, especially at a senior level. The frontbenchers largely determine party policy in collaboration with other party structures of leadership. So your ideological alignment with the party as an MP will be partly decided by your place in the formal and informal hierarchies and how much you see eye to eye with the MP who triumphs in the leadership contest and, to a lesser extent, the 'big beasts' around them who influence party policy. As always ideology is intimately bound up with power hierarchies; this hierarchy is based on party position.

Despite the horrified and critical cries about party political tribalism by the media, bloggers and twitterati, it is well known to everyone in the Westminster bubble that there is huge variation in the aspirations and values of MPs within the same party. Angela Eagle (Labour MP), Shadow Leader of the House, suggested it was typical for MPs to agree with only about 40% of their party's manifesto (2013). The ideological factions within the main parties are complex and dynamic, but have clear patterns as is obvious in the relentless exposure of them on the social media (especially twitter) and by journalists who have been briefed by MPs and advisers. At the same time, alliances between parties on particular issues, or within the government coalition established in 2010, continually lead to the creation of new forms of co-operation and conflict.

In another contrast to the depiction of MPs as tribal and slavishly following their whips, and especially so in contrast to peers, it is worth noting that MPs have been rebelling against their parties to an increasing extent for some decades (Cowley 2005). The 2010-2015 Parliament remains on course to be the latest most rebellious since 1945, just as the Blair/Brown administration was before it (Cowley and Stuart 2013). So, relatively homogeneous and loyal political parties are a phenomenon of the past. Even new MPs feel a pressure to listen as much to their local association, and their constituents, as to their whip when deciding how to vote. Despite the whips best efforts to run a highly efficient intelligence and persuasion operation to keep MPs on side, pressure from constituents/local parties, a massive decline in political parties and the fear of losing their seat all combine to make MPs far less loyal to parties. This fragmentation within parties further increases the differences between MPs.

Performance by MPs as a group is fractured by the diversity that MPs both arrive with and then develop, as I have illustrated above by drawing attention to gender and party politics. It is further complicated by continual, uneven and unpredictable change in their workplaces, both in the past but also in anticipation of the future. What are their workplaces? In a direct sense, their offices in Parliament and in constituencies, but their work indirectly takes them into homes, businesses, factories, hospitals and all other organisations/groups that stretch across the whole country and even, through aid, trade and security, to other nations. With all these links MPs are more affected than most by the seismic challenges and changes brought about by globalisation. The IT revolution has brought about a staggering increase in enquiries, requests and demands, mostly by email but even by Facebook and twitter. Within Parliament I have already alluded to the increase in constituency expectations and declining power of the whips. Select committees have become far more time-consuming and influential. Added to changes that have already taken place, or are unfolding, MPs are looking to possible future turbulence with another possible hung Parliament in 2015, boundary changes in the next Parliament, the Scottish referendum on independence, and uncertainty about our place in Europe. All these contribute to the workload, opportunities and demands for MPs.

Finally the social and spatial-temporal pressures on MPs are exceptionally complex and contradictory. They are expected to please a range of audiences – their whip, their party, their constituents, lobby groups, the media, and citizens – each with their own way of working, morality and style. Underlying all politics are webs of social relations and networks; gaining support requires endless interaction and conversation. This interaction is highly seasonal. Parliament has complex schedules for each year between opening and proroguing, for each term, for weeks when sitting and for each day (Rogers and Walters, 2006), and the various ceremonies, debates and discussions held at different times all vary in tempo, rules and mood. The procedures and standing orders governing questions, debates and the scrutiny of legislation take years to learn as do the complex of buildings in Westminster, including the Palace with its 1,100 rooms, 100 staircases and three miles of passage-ways, and TV studios, government departments and their own constituencies. Each space varies: the Commons chamber invites gladiatorial contest across the floor, the grand Pugin-decorated committee rooms inspire awe (at least in visitors even if MPs become inured), the Tea Room expects gossip and plotting, bars demand an informal banter, while the functional Portcullis House offices create a more business-like atmosphere. But the space does not shape mood in a deterministic way; for instance, events in the chamber can range from noisy verbal battles to quiet deliberation depending on the type of ritual and who is present. The architecture inclines people towards particular moods.

These audiences, seasons and sites create a kaleidoscope of ingredients so that it is as if MPs have to learn to perform in a multitude of theatres with different players and scripts every day. Some are public, within which political parties have to feign consensus and unity, while others are private, where contestation and endlessly divergent views are aired. In the words

of a former Labour backbencher, “You can say completely different things to different people and you believe them at the time. You convince yourself of contradictory things. So you say, ‘I fully support my Leader’, to the media and then you go to the tearoom and discuss how to get rid of him. This is politics. What we say is different from what we actually do.”⁶ MPs have no choice but to worry about appearances. All develop extraordinary skills at adjusting to different relationships. While I was interviewing⁷ a clerk in Portcullis House café a prominent Conservative MP walked up to us and started joking with the clerk, pretending to treat him as if he was unstable. They had been on a work trip together so knew each other well. The clerk kept trying to intervene and finally managed to say, “do you know Dr Crewe from the University of London, who is doing an academic study of MPs?” The MP appeared visibly shocked and in a second was transformed from jovial, chatty mate leaning over our table into upright back-straight, highly dignified important person showing respect to an academic – an outsider – with formality, politeness and reserve. In the blink of an eye his face was transformed from twinkling to sombre.

But different MPs handle the contradictions in their work in various ways; they find themselves with what Goffman called the dilemma of expression versus action. ‘Those who have the time and talent to perform a task well may not, because of this, have the time or talent to make it apparent that they are performing well’ (1997: 100). Most MPs tend towards either one or other – geniuses at performance on the front stage or at getting things done out of the public gaze back stage. This changeability, complexity and fragmentation raises the question, how do MPs cope? What happens to their sense of self? I will begin to address this question by looking at one aspect of their work – representing their constituents – to see how MPs do this many-faced politics in a variety of ways and ask what this tells us about the nature of democracy.

Representation – what is politics in a democracy?

15 February 2003 witnessed the largest worldwide protest since the Vietnam War with between six and ten million people expressing disagreement with the invasion of Iraq, according to the BBC.⁸ They were ignored and over ten years later the violence continues. So what does representative democracy mean if our representatives ignore so many of us? Is the performance of political representation failing in the UK if the charisma of a leader – in this case Tony Blair – triumphs over the popular will of a nation? Should we blame Tony Blair, his government or the politicians who supported his decision? Or, is it inevitable that

⁶ Interview held by Emma Crewe, December 2011.

⁷ Interview held by Emma Crewe, September 2012.

⁸ <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/2765215.stm>, accessed 15th October 2013.

government fails us and the protests, criticism and even non-violent fury may mean that the political process is alive and well? Perhaps it is not politicians that are the problem but our misdirected expectations and insufficient engagement?

Even in ordinary everyday political decisions, representation is a contest. What does it mean for an MP to represent a diverse group of over 50,000 voters, plus children, visitors and migrants/refugees who do not have the vote, who all disagree with each other, and for 650 MPs to represent a nation? Constituents may be pulling you in many directions, your local party in another, whips in another again, while other allegiances also beg for attention. The philosopher and MP Edmund Burke famously listened to his constituents but then ignored them, for example in his support for free trade with Ireland. Conservative MPs regularly quote him when they want to make the point that slavishly following your constituents is not your duty: 'Your representative owes you, not his industry only, but his judgment; and he betrays, instead of serving you, if he sacrifices it to your opinion' (Burke, 1854, pp.446-8). On the other side, Labour and Liberal Democrat MPs oppose themselves to Burke and claim to take the views of their constituents and their party as a more solid source of inspiration. But representation is so much more complex than either of these polarities.

As Fenno found in the US, when people appraise their local MP in glowing terms they are not usually referring to their policy positions, but a feeling of belonging and trust. Most constituents don't even know how their MP votes. One US representative told Fenno that no one will vote against you if you are on first names basis and if you chew their tobacco, then they will even fight for you (1978: 64). In the UK too our relationship with our MP is not so much about the representation of our *views*, as the shared belonging to a locality and their championing of our area. MPs are not just women or men of actions and policies, they are symbols with the power of evocation (as Abélès points out in France, 1991: 268). All MPs symbolise the link between local and national government, and even political locality and nation, as most succinctly illustrated when one MP presided over the celebrations for the Queen's Jubilee. Residents in an English constituency assembled on a green and the MP joked about how close we were to his constituency boundary. MPs should never trespass into another constituency – meaning visit in an official capacity – without at least notifying the MP who belongs there and explaining what they were up to. After much discussion about the order of proceedings, it began with a parade by cadets. Then two vicars from different denominations spoke about the importance of community and the MP concluded the speeches saying that the green has a pub one end and a church at the other end, symbolic of life across Britain. Then we strolled across the green to a tent with a local company selling beer and cider to drink a toast to the Queen. Within one small fete we had civil society (a residents' association) organising an event to mark the endurance of the Monarch (the Queen's Jubilee) with the army (cadets marching), the church (opening speeches) and Parliament (the MP concluding proceedings). Enterprise lubricated conversation between all these elements by selling refreshments, with plenty of jokes about who was buying the drinks. The MP said to me afterwards that he had forgotten to say the

one thing that you are supposed to say on these occasions – thanks to the organisers. It was for the MP to thank because he was the VIP at the occasion, symbolising the link between this community group meeting at the grassroots, and literally on the grass, Parliament and the Monarch reigning over the nation.⁹

On top of representing views, and symbolising a group of constituents based on geography, almost all MPs run ‘surgeries’ where residents bring problems or grievances with an agency, usually a government department and occasionally a company. (Companies rarely take much notice of individual MPs acting on behalf of constituents.) People with a substantial income pay for lawyers, accountants or doctors, but some of those more dependent on the state go to their MP as a last resort. So for them, MPs provide a link between individual / family and the government. By listening to constituents’ trials when dealing with the housing department or HM Revenue and Customs, the MP is representing their interests to the local council or central government in a way that creates a social relationship – a human bridge – over the chasm between faceless, neglectful bureaucracy and its citizens, where possible transforming the state into its more benign form dispensing welfare. The MP, or his caseworker, even give the state a name when he says, “I will write a letter to Mr x at the y Department and see how your case is progressing.” After years of dealing with people’s problems, the MPs I watched doing this had an in-depth knowledge of the characters, rules, resources and latest changes; a socio-political ethnography of the local and national welfare state no less. The weekly ritual of these surgeries, along with regular visits to local government departments, gave them computer-like memory databases but also skills of listening and empathy. Although much of the rest of their work impels MPs to talk *at* people, to be thick-skinned, and to feel oblivious to the feelings of their opponents, in the privacy of the surgeries MPs who do this work – which is the majority of them – become patient but also surprisingly good listeners.

That does not mean they always do as the constituent or resident asks; subtle judgements of merit are made during some meetings. In one case I listened in while an asylum-seeker explained to a MP that his application to stay had been refused. He planned to apply for the third time but wanted the MP’s help with housing. The MP studied the asylum-seeker’s papers carefully and explained in some detail the rules about applications for asylum and rights to housing. He feigned ignorance. This was exposed later in the conversation when it became obvious that he knew the system inside out. The MP explained to me later that it was impossible that he could remain in ignorance after years of appeals. But she told him all these rules, knowing he knew them, so that he would know that she knew the system inside out too. Unusually she declined to take action on his behalf and recommended various places to go – a good lawyer, the Refugee Council, homeless charities – suggesting that he should keep her informed and return to meet her whenever he wished. After he left, angry

⁹ Interview held by Emma Crewe, June 2012.

and brooding, I asked why in this one and only case she was not taking any action herself despite her evident sympathy for refugees in general.

MP: "Because he is not telling me the truth."

Me: "Gosh really, how do you know?"

MP: "He pretended not to know about section 4 – every asylum seeker I have met knows about section 4. But also I could see from the papers that there were many claims and court appearances he wasn't telling us about. Mr x will help almost anyone, as will the Refugee Council, so if they're not helping him then it rings alarm bells."*

(* Mr x is a lawyer well-known to her)¹⁰

It became clear that the MP was not offering help because she did not want to abuse her relationships with those who might give time to this man, either locally or in the Home Office, by demanding they focus on a case with little merit. So while in the vast majority of cases MPs take up cases by playing an advocacy role – including a huge number of cases concerned with immigration and seeking asylum – in a few they do no more than give advice during the meeting.

Some MPs may be seen as representing a group that faces discrimination and inequality both within and beyond their own constituency. Women MPs are scrutinised to see whether or not they promote gender equality, for example. But MPs' identity is never singular. One Asian MP was particularly articulate about how his identity affected his work in multiple ways.¹¹ First, his long involvement in the politics of his constituency means that everyone knows him. It also gave him, like many urban MPs, a good idea not only of the sizes of the different communities in his constituency – white, Indian, Pakistani, Tamil, Eastern European and various other groups – but what they mind about. Secondly, his Asian origins mean that people assume he knows about international matters. It also means that many with the same origin trust him more than others do, notably Pakistanis, but that some sharing his identity disapprove of him. He speaks out against caste and domestic violence, infuriating some who think he has been too influenced by Western liberal thinking and might aggravate racist assumptions about their culture. Thirdly, being Asian means that security officers in the Palace ask to see his pass more than they would white MPs. Finally, he grew up with politics. His father was a politician and during the fight for independence he was even imprisoned by the very Parliament that his son ended up sitting in. So his way of doing politics arises in part out of this particular history and identity. From the moment he wakes until he sleeps, he is on call: he has three offices, including one at home staffed by relatives,

¹⁰ Interview held by Emma Crewe, November 2012.

¹¹ Interview held by Emma Crewe, November 2012.

and each accumulates invitations, requests and obligations. If they offer an opportunity to speak and exchange views, he will not refuse. He goes to a disproportionately high number of Asian functions, perhaps three or four weddings each weekend, because if he turns them down, they will not forgive him whereas a white person will not take it personally and assume he is just too busy.

All MPs have layers of identity – race, gender, class, age, nationality... – and even one category contains many facets: black, Asian and minority ethnic implies a complex mixture of origin, race, and ethnicity, and doesn't distinguish between being British or foreign-born which has a huge influence on people's life experience. The question of whether or not people are best represented by those with a shared identity becomes problematic when you consider that there can only be overlapping identities, rarely identical ones. So while a parliamentary chamber should be representative of the wider population, because they are then more likely to consider a range of interests and the electorate will have more faith in them, an overlapping identity between specific MPs and constituents is no guarantee of truer representation. Union leader Len McClusky's perception about MPs points to the impossibility of representation: 'Labour MPs look less and less like the people they seek to represent. The big strides made in securing more women Labour MPs have also, unfortunately, been paralleled by a decline in those from working-class backgrounds' (2013). MPs representing citizens always involves a potent mix of similarity and difference between them and us (Abélès 1991: 267). One of the candidates at the 2012 Eastleigh by-election in Hampshire responded to this clamour when he said during a hustings, "if you want to speak to Westminster then I am your chance. I am you. I'm not a party person. This would be true democracy, I will speak for you. I am one of you."¹² Most of us are not particularly party political, and are getting less so as parties decline, but we see ourselves as belonging to a particular locality so, unsurprisingly, we want our MP to hail from our local area above all when we are choosing them. This candidate was evoking an apolitical local form of 'us' but in doing so, he left others (and politics itself) out in the cold.

As Dunn puts it, the idea of democracy implies that 'in human political communities it ought to be ordinary people (the adult citizens) and not extra-ordinary people who rule' (1992: v). Giles Brandreth (former MP) told the BBC that fellow Conservative Ann Widdecombe (former MP) marched him out of first class to second class when travelling by train, advising him that it was better if MPs did not set themselves apart.¹³ And yet, paradoxically, once citizens become MPs they can only survive by adapting to extraordinary work and so becoming different. A politician needs to respond to endless requests from constituents, whips, interest groups, and local supporters without having enough time to do justice to any

¹² Public hustings, Eastleigh by-election, February 2013.

¹³ Today Programme, BBC Radio 4, 20th October 2012.

of these demands; these interests are unknowable, dynamic and open to endless contestation. According to one Conservative MP, “It feels like Genghis Khan attaching four horses to your limbs and you are pulled in four directions.” The more inclusively you listen, the more directions you will be pulled in and the more you sink under the weight of many voices and demands.

As Saward explains eloquently how a mix of continuity and change influence representation.. Representation is something to be performed within relationships that continually change but the claims made by the politicians – about themselves or the constituency – tend to be more compelling when they resonate with existing cultural understandings (2007). While conventional views of political representation usually ask whether MPs are responsive to those they represent, as if their interests can be known, he implies a different question: does the MP silence or evoke the represented? Without our MP, we would not exist as a constituency – a political entity reaching up to the nation. The anthropologist Latour also challenges us to think about politics differently: Politics is one of the ways that we create society so when people refer to a crisis of representation in democratic politics, they are undervaluing a process that is easy to take for granted. When people rubbish politics, and political talk is portrayed as false, fickle and corrupt, we judge the conditions of one style of talking in relation to those of another. After all ‘political discourse appears to be untruthful only in contrast with other forms of truth’ (Latour 2003: 147). For example, if you are conducting a scientific experiment about what subjects said in relation to a given question, truth depends on faithfully recording and reproducing what they said. If you are doing politics, the representative doesn’t faithfully produce the people’s views; she converts multiple views into one, variously influenced by a range of audiences (party whips, local party associations, charismatic or vulnerable constituents, other MPs in their faction, lobbyists and so on) and using various strategies for filtering out, analysing and privileging some views above others. There is no alternative. So to pretend that political talk can be guided by mere reason, straight talk and the literal representation of multitude of interests is dark and dangerous (ibid: 162).

Re-presentation of other people is not usefully seen as a mechanical articulation of the interests of a group but as a changeable relationship between a constituency and the person symbolically creating it, within which claims are made, contested, thrown out and remade. That politicians change their mind is an inevitable result of responding to new circumstances and consulting with other people.

Dealing with Janus: riffs, rhythms and rituals

MPs performances arise out of their identities, backgrounds and histories and they respond to the endlessly conflicting demands thrown at them by party, different groups of citizens

and the media. I have portrayed MPs as endlessly diverse, navigating many complex, dynamic socio-political worlds each day, and influenced Janus-like¹⁴ by both past and future. Janus is the god of entrance and exit, beginnings and endings, and he looks backwards and forwards simultaneously. In a similar vein MPs are not navigating their multiple roles, pressures and audiences consecutively but in the same moment. If their performances are really so complex, I return to the question: how do they cope? Some don't. Alcohol consumption and divorce among MPs is relatively high.¹⁵ But many do, judging by the skill with which they adapt their performance to multiple sites, audiences and demands. There are three processes that provide some continuity for MPs between and across all this chaotic diversity and dynamism. The first are the riffs that MPs develop to make sense of ideology and communicate as policies and arguments, each improvised for different audiences. The second are rhythms that organise the work of MPs by creating repetition in time and space but allow for variation at the same time (Edensor 2004). The third are the rituals – as examples, debates in parliamentary chambers, interviews in TV studios, and speeches in party conferences – which punctuate the daily routine with riffs and rhythms of particular political, social and cultural significance.

These riffs, rhythms and rituals deserve some explanation. Like jazz musicians MPs create riffs, as Chris Bryant (Labour MP) puts it, perhaps seven or eight at any one time. For example, at one point he had to mug up on pensions and so he developed a 90-second linguistic riff, which could be improvised or extended to several different lengths. It is OK if people hear the same points in different contexts, but “If you have a reputation for using formulas, then you are going nowhere,”¹⁶ he adds. Riffs can be useful for any occasion but your style and tempo need to change completely in the different sites because different relationships are being formed. So a good MP has riffs but has to appear as if she/he doesn't, otherwise he/she is acting impersonally. You have to be able to respond to an intervention in a highly personalised way to be considered a good performer. You need to have an awareness of specificity – the audience, the mood, the relationship – and to express a coherence of your self, and your ideology, which glosses over the fact that all human beings have ups and downs, changes of heart and so on (Goffman 1997: 101). Both political parties and select committees have to do this too. They have to feign a consensus view over time by establishing riffs in the face of diverging opinions and changing membership.

¹⁴ Nicholas Sarra, a colleague at the University of Hertfordshire, suggested this analogy (Sarra, pers comm, 2013).

¹⁵ Alcohol Concern carried out a survey in 2013 and one quarter of the 150 MPs who responded believed that there is an unhealthy drinking culture in parliament (2013). According to Conservative MP Charles Walker around one sixth of the 2010 intake of Conservative have divorced, separated or had long-term relationships break down by early 2013 (Hellen and Grimston 2013).

¹⁶ Interview held by Emma Crewe, January 2012.

The popular view of MPs as locked in antagonistic and polarised battle underestimates disagreement within parties but also how much there are shared riffs between all parliamentarians that they tend to take for granted. Most obviously all MPs speak publicly about the need for action and change when trying to win support from the public. Although traditionally Conservative philosophy tends towards the protection of national institutions, since Thatcher's reforming zeal they have championed change almost as much as Labour. With austerity and cuts in funding for state institutions, such as the NHS and the BBC, the Labour party, in contrast, is arguing for protecting those national institutions that constitute the welfare state. In one sense Labour may be becoming more conservative, while Conservatives are even more impatient for sweeping reform of the EU, of immigration policy and of the way that the state provides services than they explain publicly. So the parties are moving in different directions in part in opposition to each other but none praise British traditions or spurn modernity. Modernity has become a taken-for-granted dominant riff for all politicians.

While riffs give shape to the speech-interactions between politicians, that is, the content of their social performance, their bodies have to navigate time (parliamentary calendar and seasons) and space (a vast estate in Westminster and the streets of their constituencies) by following routines and timetables or refusing to do so. These rhythms create continuity and disruption in the work of MPs and their importance is revealed by the status of diary secretaries. Although some do it themselves, most MPs have a member of staff who arranges when, where and with whom they should place themselves and patterns emerge when you look at MPs' diaries. Groups of MPs share rhythms in common – mostly planned such as attending a Select Committee and others spontaneous like sitting regularly with your mates in the tearoom – while some rhythms are idiosyncratic (e.g., visiting particular businesses in their constituency annually). Like riffs, these rhythms allow room for improvisation or can be disrupted (see Rai 2013) or transformed, but in the everyday work of MPs they provide some continuity in social relations and form, while riffs create the content, which makes it possible for MPs to navigate their social world. It means they can develop and maintain key social relationships and have some continuous sense of self in relation to the world around them. Finally, the more events are politically, socially and culturally significant, the more they are ritualised. This usually means they will be charged with symbolic meaning, regulated by rules and involved in reproducing or challenging a socio-political hierarchy (as I have argued in earlier work, Crewe 2005). While an unimportant All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) may be run informally, with few rigid rules and minimal sense of hierarchy, an important political event – Prime Minister's Questions (PMQs), a Public Bill Committee or a party political conference – is replete with strict rules, symbols of power or rebellion and status hierarchy.

Let's see how this works in PMQs (see also Lovenduski, this volume). The main party leaders prepare beforehand with their allies and advisers, developing linguistic riffs with the aim of

humiliating the other side and its leaders. The Prime Minister does not know what questions will be thrown at him so is briefed on all the major issues facing government. The opposition identify government's vulnerable spots and craft verbal attacks; in this context words become deeds and riffs become weapons. The rhythm of PMQs is identical – every Wednesday for 30 minutes with carefully regulated questioning and answers by the PM leaning against the despatch box. Despite the promises of incoming PMs to tone down the aggression, it remains famous for gladiatorial verbal combat, always witnessed by packed benches of MPs. When the leaders do adopt a less aggressive tone, the hacks describe them as dull and ineffectual (Hansard Society 2014: 49-50). It is a ritual, rather than just a routine, because it is charged with cultural, social and political significance, the best-attended political event by MPs and most observed by outsiders. It is seen as a way of taking the temperature of the fortunes of government versus opposition, the parties and the leaders all at the same time. Along with elections and party conferences, which tend to be infrequent, it is the key public occasion for evoking party unity – inspiring social *communitas* within parties through antagonism to others. PMQs is the most concentrated and theatrical ritual within which government leaders defend themselves, and publicise their occasional triumphs, and opposition exposes their inevitable arrogance and failings. Underneath all that, various hierarchies are on display. Frontbenchers surround their leader while the banks of backbenchers behind boost (or occasionally undermine) their superiors in the party. It is this ritual above all others that has been criticised for its macho, aggressive style; women MPs, in particular, describe it as infantile and excluding. Recent Hansard Society research indicates that the public are not at all impressed by the point-scoring noisy bluster; in the words of one member of the public, '...theatre as in farce drama to see who can out do the other' (ibid: 6). Some people even wondered whether the whole event was scripted. So the challenge for MPs when reviewing their rituals – or culture and procedures, as they are more likely to call them – is to address mechanisms of exclusion without losing the political punch and significance.

My reflection on the complexity of the world of MPs has portrayed their performance as multi-layered. MPs are differentiated by the way they respond to their own diversity, their position in power hierarchies, continual change, and a multitude of conflicting pressures, but pulled together by shared (or at least strongly overlapping) regimes, such as riffs, rhythms and rituals. How do these all work simultaneously? Stacey proposes a helpful analogy with complexity sciences in his exploration of agency, whereby patterns in the natural world or in simulated computer models display paradoxes of stability and instability, predictability and unpredictability, at the same time (2011). He also points out that the diversity of humans, and their exercise of choice, makes them different from phenomena in the natural world. Rather than Kant's dualistic 'both... and' type explanations, we need to hold paradoxes in the same moment and space (ibid: 298), as is possible with Dewey's theory of practical judgement: 'all deliberation upon what to do is concerned with the completion and determination of a situation in some respect incomplete and so indeterminate' (1916: 384).

If social life is so changeable and paradoxical, predicting the future on the basis of the past becomes even less simple. So rational choice theories that assume MPs act on the basis of an assessment of self-interested predictions about the future look decidedly unconvincing. Similarly, the other main strand of scholarly theory usually aimed at Parliament – institutionalism and its assumptions about how people are governed by rules – fails to explain why people ignore norms and how institutions change. In contrast, Dewey's approach, conversely, has innovation sewn into its core:

‘You and I may keep running in certain particular ruts, but conditions are provided for somebody else to foresee – or infer – new combinations and new results. The depersonalizing of the things of everyday practice becomes the chief agency of their repersonalizing in new and more fruitful modes of practice. The paradox of theory and practice is that theory is with respect to all other modes of practice the most practical of all things, and the more impartial and impersonal it is, the more truly practical it is (ibid.:441).

So MPs are engaged in practical judgement (or deliberative practice), as are all individuals, and are both constrained and enabled by power and values, the past and future *in the same moment*. They resolve these paradoxes in the everyday present through shared riffs, rhythms and rituals with theory and practice intertwined. There remains a difficulty in finding the language to describe this intertwining – for example, in practical judgement or deliberative practice the noun is emphasised above the adjective. But I hope that the explanation is at least clear enough to see how politicians do extraordinary work in ordinary human everyday ways.

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